THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

of

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

presents

EXPLORATIONS

Sunday, January 21, 1973, at 8:30 p.m.
Convocation Hall, Arts Building

"Gott ist unser Sonn' und Schild"
(from Cantata 79, Gott, der Herr, ist Sonn' und Schild) ..... J. S. Bach

"Schaeme dich, o Seele, nicht"
(from Cantata 147, Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben) ..... J. S. Bach

Merla Aikman, mezzo-soprano
Dayna Fisher, oboe
Alexandra Munn, harpsichord

Songs for Alto, Viola and Piano, Op. 91 ..... Brahms
- Gestillte Sehnsucht
- Geistliches Wiegenlied

Merla Aikman, mezzo-soprano
Michael Bowie, viola
Alexandra Munn, piano

Etude in C sharp minor, Op. 2, No. 1 ..... Scriabin

Two Poems, Op. 32 ..... Scriabin
- Allegro, con eleganza, con fiducia
- Andante cantabile

Sonata No. 4 in F sharp major, Op. 30 ..... Scriabin
- Andante
- Prestissimo volando

Ernesto Lejano, piano

Wiegenlied, Op. 41, No. 1 ..... Richard Strauss

Siete Canciones Populares Espanolas ..... Manuel de Falla
(Seven Popular Spanish Songs)
- El Pano moruno
- Seguidilla Murciana
- Asturiana
- Jota
- Nana
- Canción
- Polo

Merla Aikman, mezzo-soprano
Alexandra Munn, piano

INTERMISSION

Trio in C minor, Op. 101 ..... Brahms
- Allegro energico
- Presto non assai
- Andante grazioso
- Allegro molto

Thomas Rolston, violin
Claude Kenneson, violoncello
Isobel Rolston, piano

Last concert in this series: Sunday, February 11, at 8:30 p.m. — Baroque Music for voices and instruments; the Hindemith Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 11, No. 4 (1922); and Brahms' Trio in E flat major, Op. 40, for horn, violin and piano.

PROGRAM NOTES

Cantata No. 79, "Gott, der Herr, ist Sonn' und Schild", was composed for Reformation Sunday, probably in 1736. The first aria from the cantata reflects the generally festive character appropriate to such a significant commemorative occasion in the Lutheran church year. The second aria heard tonight is from an earlier cantata (1716) composed for the fourth Sunday in Advent, a penitential season.

Bach relied often on conventional formulae to produce the vast volume of new music required for services at churches or courts where he served as director of music. These two arias both exemplify a type of texture common during the Baroque period. Two treble lines, performed by oboe and voice, alternate or engage in contrapuntal interplay, supported by a keyboard continuo bass line over which the player improvises accompanying harmonies. Bach had such complete control of compositional technique that he was able to invest a great proportion of his music with the kind of beauty most composers achieved only in rare masterpieces. These arias are only two of hundreds in the wealth of music to be found in Bach's cantatas. The works were difficult even for performers under Bach's direction, in a time when the finest musicians found employment in church music. Nowadays, when few churches will support first-rank musicians, the cantatas are most generally heard only in recordings.

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Sometimes called simply the "viola songs", Brahms' Opus 91 stands among the best-loved of his lieder. As voice and viola duets, the songs can be compared directly to the many Bach arias which combine the voice with a solo instrumental obbligato. And Brahms, like Bach, often requires of the singer an instrumental agility. One singer friend of Brahms wrote to him regarding parts of Opus 91: "[This] is very difficult even for a talented singer. Why are you so cruel, turning women into oboes or violins? Is this why you begin with B like that other cruel man [Beethoven]?" She might also have referred to Bach. Yet the rich, low sonorities produced by the ensemble are typically Brahmsian, typically nineteenth-century.

The first song of the pair was actually composed almost twenty years after the second, before publication in 1884. The delicate tension between longing and peace inherent in the text is expressed in long curves of the two melodic lines. The idea for the second song, a lullaby, came to Brahms when the first son of a close friend was born in 1865. It is based on the old German cradle song and carol, "Joseph, lieber Joseph mein", heard first in the viola and later taken over by the voice. Here Brahms has transformed one of the folk songs he so revered into the kind of artful simplicity characteristic of much of his later music.

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Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) took the piano music of Chopin as a point of departure for his own. The affinities are apparent not only in obvious ways like the titles of pieces, but also in his sensitivity to harmonic and instrumental coloring and extended lyrical melody. Nearly always ardently romantic, Scriabin's music tended later in his life toward fragmentation of melody, more ambiguous or dissonant harmony, and more intense expression. Mystical ecstasy was for Scriabin almost a normal state.

The Etude from Opus 2, like the Chopin etudes, is a study in musical expression as well as technical acumen. Both passionate and lyrical, it is a heart-on-the-sleeve piece, but one demanding utmost sensitivity to the instrument.

The Sonata, Op. 30, and the Two Poems, Op. 32, date from a time just before Scriabin began to explore new sounds and systems in his music. This sonata is the last by Scriabin to be separated into movements; and there are only two. In the manner of an introduction, the first (slow) movement leads directly into the second, whose furious pace and demonic agitation pose the same kind of abject contrast to be noted between the two Poems. The first of the Poems is a delicate vignette, a study in careful balance of tone in various registers. The second is as rhetorical and imposing as the first is fragile reverie. Scriabin was scarcely ever a musician, or a man, to do anything halfway.

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Although Richard Strauss is often noted as a master of musical shock treatments or dazzling technical effects, the Wiegenlied of Opus 41 (1899) shows that his genius could also work in simple terms. The song consists of three stanzas, the second and third varied slightly but deftly to color the meaning of the text. Throughout, the voice floats breathlessly above flowing arpeggios.

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Resident in Paris from 1907 to 1914, Manuel de Falla found the techniques and aesthetics espoused by contemporary French composers like Debussy particularly fitted to his goals of an indigenous Spanish art music. His Seven Popular Spanish Songs (1914) are not arrangements or transcriptions of actual popular songs, but rather "a transmutation of their essential values". Texts are simple, sometimes ribald. In these songs, Spanish qualities are evident in the ornamental patterns of the vocal line; harmonies and figurations in the accompaniment similar to idioms of the guitar; and the special rhythmic élan often identified with Spanish music.

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In his Trio, Op. 101 (1886), Brahms has realized a maximum of power in a minimum time span. The complexities of rhythm and thematic relationships underlying much of the piece can actually be heard, yet they enhance rather than obscure the natural musical flow. Brahms is often classified as a conservative relative to some of his contemporaries (like Wagner or Liszt), perhaps because much of his originality is not of an obvious, theatrical character and often relates to rhythm more than to harmony. Also, a great deal of his most remarkable work is chamber music, rather than more showy operatic or orchestral genres.

The Trio as a whole is comprised of two forceful outer movements surrounding two more introspective inner movements — a plan used by Brahms in other works as well. Within each movement, certain basic principles of classical forms are observed, but Brahms adapts them to the requirements of the material at hand — as in the first movement, where the themes of the opening sonata exposition are stated in reverse order when they return at the close of the movement. In this same movement, one of the most effective of thematic derivations is heard in a long-breathed cantabile theme (played first by violin and cello in unison) that is an augmented transformation of the grandiose theme heard at the very beginning of the movement.

Almost as often as not, Brahms' musical ideas in each movement do not fall into consistent metric groupings of two or three beats, especially in the slow third movement in which a truly heard meter signature would be 7/4. The flexibility is, however, in the ideas themselves, rather than being a self-conscious overlay of purposely clever artifice. Brahms' musical logic, especially at this stage of his life, was of the superior type that calls attention to itself only as it impresses us with its rightness.

— W. K.